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WHAT TO SAY IN HARD CONVERSATIONS

BIBLICAL COUNSELING GUIDE TO COMFORTING OTHERS IN SUFFERING

LIGHT UNIVERSITY | AMERICAN ASSOCIATION of CHRISTIAN COUNSELORS

Introduction

Few things feel more difficult than sitting with someone who is suffering and not knowing whether what you're about to say will help or make things worse.

You want to be there for them. But most of us know that rushed words or shallow reassurances can do more harm than good. **Pain has a way of making words feel small.**

When someone's life has been shaken by loss, betrayal, illness, or grief, you're not stepping into an ordinary conversation. Emotions are raw. Questions are close to the surface. Faith itself may be in trouble. And the person sitting in front of you may not even know how to name what they're feeling. They just know that life no longer feels stable.

In moments like that, it's tempting to explain things too quickly. To defend God, lift the mood, or say something that brings immediate relief. But suffering rarely works that way. Sometimes what a hurting person needs most is not a fast answer but someone willing to listen and stay present, resisting the urge to speak right away.

That's why a biblical understanding of suffering matters so much. Not because it gives you all the answers, but because it steadies you. It helps you listen well, speak carefully, and offer comfort when someone else's world feels like it's falling apart.

This guide is meant to help you do that. Not by handing you a script, but by helping you think more clearly about what suffering does, what the Bible says, and what faithful care actually looks like when you're sitting with someone in pain.

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Suffering Often Produces a Crisis of Faith

Suffering often brings a person to a place of crisis. It is not only that suffering hurts. It is that suffering confuses. It disorients. It makes people question what they thought they understood about God and about life.

Many people carry, deep in their soul, the sense that they have some kind of contract with God. They may not say it that way, but they live as if it were true. They think, I will do my part, I will work hard, I will give myself to the Lord, and then God will take care of me. And when brokenness or illness or deep disappointment enters their life, they begin to feel that God has abandoned them. When a person feels that way, **a crisis begins.**

We see this throughout Scripture. Job experienced it when suffering entered his life and he did not understand why. He wanted someone to stand between him and God and explain what had happened.

If you do not recognize that suffering is producing this kind of confusion and instability — not just sadness — you may speak too quickly and miss the real struggle taking place in the person's soul.

Example: When Someone Feels Shaken

Someone says, "I've tried to do everything right, and I still don't understand why this is happening." You do not need to correct that on the spot or rush to explain God's purposes.

A faithful response might sound like this:

- "I can hear how much pain you're carrying right now."
- "You don't have to figure this out today."
- "I'm really glad you told me that."
- "I don't have an easy answer for you. But I'm not going anywhere."
- "It's okay to not be okay with this right now."

These responses make room for the crisis instead of pretending it is not there.

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A Biblical Theology of Suffering

One of the things we discover in Scripture is that many people do not have a rich enough theology of suffering. They may know one or two things the Bible says, but they have not taken in the breadth of what God has revealed. That leaves them vulnerable when suffering comes, and it leaves caregivers vulnerable to speaking in shallow or mistaken ways.

The Bible teaches first that suffering is a consequence of sin. Adam and Eve sinned in the garden, and through that rebellion came death, disease, pain, thorns, and thistles. Life east of Eden is hard. In that sense, suffering belongs to this fallen world.

But that is only one reason, and it is nowhere near enough to explain every case. Paul spoke of a thorn in the flesh given so he would not exalt himself — suffering used by God to humble pride and teach us that His grace is sufficient.

Scripture also tells us that God disciplines His children, and there are situations where our own choices bring painful consequences. Yet even here, discipline is not outside the loving hand of God.

But suffering is not always tied to a person's own sin or failure. Job makes that plain. His friends assumed God was operating on a simple principle: do good and be blessed, do wrong and be punished. They were wrong.

Job's suffering was connected to a larger spiritual conflict he could not see. This matters greatly. People who suffer often think, "I must have done something wrong." They fall into guilt and self-condemnation. But sometimes suffering has nothing to do with personal guilt at all. Sometimes God is doing something beyond what the person can understand.

Jesus made this same point when speaking of the man born blind. The suffering was not because of personal sin, but so the works of God would be displayed. Joseph suffered terribly at the hands of his brothers, yet God used those very events for good. That does not make evil actions good. It does show that God is sovereign over what others mean for evil.

> "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our consciences, but shouts in our pains. It is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.
>
> — **C.S. LEWIS** • The Problem of Pain (1940)

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A Biblical Theology of Suffering (Cont.)

Sometimes suffering in our lives becomes part of a comfort chain. God comforts us so that we may comfort others. Our suffering becomes part of the ministry God gives us.

All of this means our theology of suffering must be broader, deeper, and richer than a single explanation. Scripture gives us categories that ground us, but not a formula we can force onto every hurting person.

Example: When Someone Assumes Their Suffering Must Be Their Fault

Someone says, "Maybe God is doing this because I failed Him."

- "I understand why you'd go there. But suffering isn't always that simple — and I'd hate for you to carry blame that isn't yours to carry."
- "There are times when suffering is tied to our choices, but there are also times when it has nothing to do with that at all."
- "Can I be honest? I think we should move slowly here rather than assume the worst about what God is doing."
- "The Bible actually gives a lot of reasons for suffering. Guilt is one — but it's far from the only one."

DIG DEEPER: KEY SCRIPTURES

2 Corinthians 12:7–9

God's grace is sufficient — strength made perfect in weakness

Job 1–2

Suffering beyond personal sin — a larger spiritual conflict at work

John 9:1–3

Not because of sin, but so the works of God may be displayed

Genesis 50:20

What was meant for evil, God intended for good

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Don’t Come as the Answer Person

Even with all of that biblical understanding, we must be careful about what we do with it when we come alongside a suffering person. One of the great mistakes caregivers make is assuming they are there to explain why the person is suffering.

We must resist that temptation.

That was the posture of Job's friends. They believed they had an answer for human suffering, and they downloaded it onto Job. Instead of helping him, they added to his burden.

It is good for us to know what the Bible teaches about suffering. It secures us. It gives us breadth. It keeps us from shallow thinking. But that knowledge is not a license to explain another person's suffering to them in the middle of their pain.

Some people will never know the reason for their suffering. Job did not receive a full explanation from God. God never felt obligated to explain Himself, and we should not feel obligated to do what God Himself did not do.

This requires humility. We may know that suffering can come from life in a fallen world, from discipline, from pride, from satanic conflict, from family wounds, from God's purpose to display His glory, or from His desire to comfort others through us. But knowing those categories does not mean we know which one applies to the person in front of us. We are not called to diagnose people's suffering with certainty.

There is a time to teach on suffering. There is a time to help people build a theology of suffering from Scripture. But in the immediate moment of pain, the person in front of you needs someone who will come near without pretending to know more than they know.

Example: When Someone Asks, "Why Would God Let This Happen?"

That question can create a lot of pressure. You may feel you need to say something profound right away. But a wise response might sound more like this:

- "That is a real and serious question. I'm not going to pretend I have the full answer."
- "I don't want to give you a quick response that misses what you're actually carrying."
- "I may not know what God is doing here. But I'm not going anywhere."
- "You don't need me to solve this right now. You need someone who will walk through it with you."

These responses resist the urge to become the answer person while still caring honestly.

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Be Present, Accepting, Affirming, and Hopeful

If we are not called to be answer persons, then how do we care well for those who suffer?

It starts with presence. Sometimes we walk into a room anxious, wondering what we are going to say. But faithful care begins by remembering that we are not there mainly to speak. We are there to embody the love of God in the way we sit, listen, respond, and remain. There is a great difference between going into a room to perform and going into a room to be present.

Along with presence must come acceptance. People who are suffering may voice confusion, anger, guilt, doubt, and deep frustration. They may rail out in ways that seem unsettling. We should not rebuke them for that. The Psalms are full of raw cries addressed to God. Let them speak. Let them pour out what is in their heart. Acceptance means we are not shocked by their pain and not threatened by their struggle.

We should also affirm them. People in suffering often think their pain proves they are failing — that they are terrible Christians, or that God is against them. They may feel ashamed of the very questions they are asking. A wise caregiver reminds them of their dignity and of God's care. They may not be able to receive every word in the moment, but they can sense whether they are in the presence of someone willing to hear them without condemnation.

Then there is encouragement, but it must be offered carefully. Sometimes encouragement comes through a passage of Scripture, a picture of God's care, or a reminder that the Lord remains near. Sometimes it is more fitting simply to stay close and assure the person they are not alone. Do not pull back because their suffering is uncomfortable. Do not disappear because their anger or sorrow is difficult to be around. Remaining near is often one of the greatest ministries you can offer.

Example: When Someone Speaks Out of Anger, Shame, or Deep Sadness

Someone says, "I don't even know if I can pray right now," or, "I think God has forgotten me."

- "Thank you for being that honest with me."
- "You don't have to clean this up for me. Just say what's real."
- "I can hear how heavy this is."
- "I'm here. And I'm not pulling away."
- "We don't have to figure this out all at once."

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The Goal is Incarnating the Love of God

At the heart of all faithful care is this: we go to suffering people not mainly to explain, but to incarnate the love of God.

When our minds are anchored in the breadth of what Scripture teaches, we are less likely to panic in the face of pain. We are less likely to reach for quick explanations. We are more able to remain calm, tender, and useful, even when we cannot identify what God is doing or why.

That frees us to bring something more valuable than explanation. Often the greatest gift you can offer a suffering person is not a sentence that clears everything up. It is the experience of being with someone who has come in humility, with biblical steadiness, and with genuine love.

Build a rich theology of suffering for your own soul. Let Scripture broaden your understanding and deepen your humility. But when you go to the person who is in pain, do not go as the one who knows everything. Go as the presence of God's care.

Example: When Someone Is Quiet and There Are No Good Words

Sometimes the person in front of you is too overwhelmed to say much at all. In those moments, the response can be very simple:

- "I'm right here with you."
- "We don't have to talk right now."
- "You're not alone in this."
- "I'll stay as long as you need me to."

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Helpful Responses for Hard Conversations

Everything in this guide is meant to help you feel more confident in what to actually say when you're sitting with someone in pain. When you're in the room, you need to be present and calm. But then you need words. Not perfect words, but words that open the door for someone to be honest, and questions that help you walk through it with them.

Below is not a script to rehearse, but starting points and simple responses to help you enter the conversation well. We've provided follow-up questions to help you with each response where appropriate.

When You First Sit Down with Someone

- "I'm really glad you told me what's going on."
- "I'm so sorry you're carrying this."
- "I don't have all the answers, but I want to be here with you."
- "That sounds incredibly heavy."

Follow-up questions:

- "How long have you been carrying this?"
- "Who else knows what you're going through right now?"
- "What made you decide to talk about it today?"
- "What would be most helpful for you right now — do you need to talk it through, or do you just need someone to sit with you?"

When Someone Is Confused

- "I get why this would leave you with more questions than answers."
- "This kind of suffering can really shake a person to the core."
- "You don't need to rush to make sense of this right now."

Follow-up questions:

- "What question keeps coming back to you the most?"
- "When did things start feeling this unclear?"
- "Is there a part of this that feels especially hard to make sense of?"
- "What did you believe about this situation before everything shifted?"

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Helpful Responses for Hard Conversations

When Someone Feels Abandoned by God

- "A lot of faithful people have felt exactly that in seasons of suffering."
- "You're not strange for feeling that way. And you're not wrong for saying it out loud."
- "Even here, you are not alone."

Follow-up questions:

- "When did that feeling start — was there a specific moment?"
- "What did your relationship with God feel like before this happened?"
- "Is there anything that still feels true about God, even in the middle of this?"
- "What would it mean to you right now to feel like He was near?"

When Someone Feels Guilty or Ashamed

- "Suffering doesn't automatically mean you've done something wrong."
- "Let's not draw conclusions that Scripture itself doesn't force."
- "What you're going through right now is not proof that God has turned away from you."

Follow-up questions:

- "Where do you think that guilt is coming from?"
- "Has anyone told you this is your fault — or is that something you've been telling yourself?"
- "What would it feel like to let go of that for a moment and just sit in God's care?"
- "If a close friend came to you carrying this same weight, what would you say to them?"

When Someone Is Angry and Letting it Out

- "Thank you for being that honest with me."
- "I'm not afraid of what you're saying. Keep going."
- "You don't need to hide your struggle here. Not with me."

Follow-up questions:

- "What are you most angry about right now?"
- "Is there something specific that keeps making it worse?"
- "What do you wish someone would say to you — or stop saying to you?"
- "Has anyone given you space to feel this way, or have people been trying to fix it?"

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Helpful Responses for Hard Conversations

Gentle Questions You Can Ask Anytime

- "What has felt hardest for you in all of this?"
- "What's been weighing on you the most?"
- "What do you find yourself thinking about when you're alone?"
- "How can I best care for you right now?"

Simple Ways to Offer Hope

- "We'll take this one step at a time."
- "I'm going to keep walking with you through this."
- "You don't have to carry this by yourself."
- "God is often doing more than we can see — even when none of it makes sense yet.

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Conclusion

You don't need perfect words to care for someone who is suffering. What people remember most is not that someone explained everything — it's that someone stayed. Someone listened. Someone spoke with gentleness and truth from the Bible. No rushing them through their pain.

That's exactly what you'll be trained to do in Caring for People God's Way, our premier Biblical Counseling training program developed by the American Association of Christian Counselors.

As Dr. Tim Clinton puts it: "We started this program back in 1997 because we saw a massive gap between people who need help and those equipped to provide it, especially from a biblical perspective. Hundreds of thousands of people have gone through it since. And our saying at the AACC has always been this: asking for help is hard, but finding help shouldn't be."

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If someone you are caring for is in crisis or experiencing thoughts of self-harm, please encourage them to contact a licensed mental health professional or call 988 (Suicide and Crisis Lifeline) immediately. The principles and responses in this guide are rooted in Scripture and reflect a biblical counseling framework. Individual situations vary, and wisdom should always be exercised in applying any guidance to a specific person's circumstances.

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